

# **TINDERBOX**<sup>(/)</sup> **POETRY JOURNAL**

No. 2 (No. 7 and No. 2): oil on canvas: Mark  
Rothko: 1951

---

I.

The first breath is always the rawest. This can't  
be helped. All the sillage of the preceding one—

the motor exhaust, the taste, like coppered fingers  
after clutching old change, of blood, the ragged  
desperation—it's all still there. Like water  
in the chest of a drowned man. There's nothing

to do but give a man something soft to hold  
—say, a bale of wool—to convince him

to inhale anyway. This man is no different.

He lies prone in the field.

A shepherd sits next to him,

taking in the scene, waiting.

II.

Eye-level with the flora, now a yard high,

a pink plane hovering above green as far

as the land goes, the flat yolk of daisies suspended

in misty albumin. The sheep so white, so dense,

you might confuse them, if you only ever gazed

forward and never up, for the clouds themselves.

The clouds like eggshells, holding color only

in their creases, the places where hands pried

them apart. Thin green streams where some soul

tried to suture them back together with strings of grass.

The shepherd arrived the same way as his guest, flat on his back,

eyes unblinking. With nothing more than the seeds

in the treads of his boots, he sprung a pasture

from the badlands in which he awakened.

Sewed echinacea, and orchids, and gerbera—florae

that produce the most oxygen. Plants that almost respire

enough to keep a man breathing all on their own.

III.

As the new man begins his undeath, the shepherd turns

him on his side, leaning against him, the razed fields

of their backs for a time married. With his cloak,  
he wipes the tears that dry down like chalky gypsum

on the new man's cheeks. Finished coughing out the old,  
the new man stills. The field inhales deeply, huffs to attention.

*Good morning*, the shepherd offers, as if there,  
it is always morning, always day brimming

on the edge of tomorrow. *I'm Eric.*\*

IV.

The shepherd takes a puff of his cigarette, pursing his lips  
to reveal an interior pink, as he blows white

into the breeze, extends it to his guest.

The new man takes reaches for the stub

and their hands meet without touching, like wind  
through stiff reeds, their slight bend the only proof

of any contact at all. The new man blows out  
his name with a lungfull of smoke.

*George*, he breathes. *I'm George.*\*

A pause. *Is this heaven?*

Eric exhales. *It ain't earth. For now, that's enough.*

George nods. They breathe in tandem  
with the pasture; inhale, exhale, and again—

---



Ariana Benson was born in Norfolk, Virginia. She received the 2020 Graybeal-Gowen Poetry Prize and the 2021 Porter House Review Poetry Prize. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Colorado Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *World Literature Today*, *Shenandoah*, *Auburn Avenue*, where she serves as Nonfiction Editor, and elsewhere. She is the 2022 Eliza Moore Fellow for Artistic Excellence at the Oak Spring Garden Foundation. Through her writing, she strives to fashion vignettes of Blackness that speak to its infinite depth and richness.

